

THE STING OF THE DAY'S HEAT
CREEPS FROM THE NAPE OF
YOUR NECK AS A HERD OF
BUFFALO MUSCLES IN ON THE
ZEBRA AT THE WATERHOLE.

Beyond, trees shudder at the might of approaching elephants, and the horizon stirs with the slow gait of a pride of lions readying for another night of mischief. The safari is at the heart of every African romance, and South Africa offers the most accessible wildlife-watching on the continent. A profusion of national parks and private reserves caters to every budget, taste, nerve and whimsy.

SAFARI ADVENTURES 01



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When to Visit

The best time to see wildlife is during winter, from June to September, when cool, dry temperatures reduce foliage and waterholes, and draw animals into the open for easy spotting. Summer is hot, wet and green, and although the wildlife is less visible, the landscape is rich in colour and the birdlife is spectacular.

Animals Galore

South Africa ranks an estimated third in the world in terms of biological diversity. The wealth of landscapes supports a boggling array of fauna, with more than 200 mammal species, 800 bird species, 370 reptile species and 2000 fish species.

The Big Five have held celebrity status among South Africa’s wildlife since tourism was a concept on a whiteboard. Membership is exclusive to the black rhino, Cape buffalo, lion, leopard and elephant. Strutting, stalking, striding and skulking like any starlet worth their salt, they move with an innate ascendancy and immortalise themselves adeptly onto your camera.

But the beauty of the wildlife here is equally captured in the first stumbling steps of a baby zebra, the humbling yawn of a heavy-eyed hippo or the impish antics of juvenile baboons. It could fit inside a

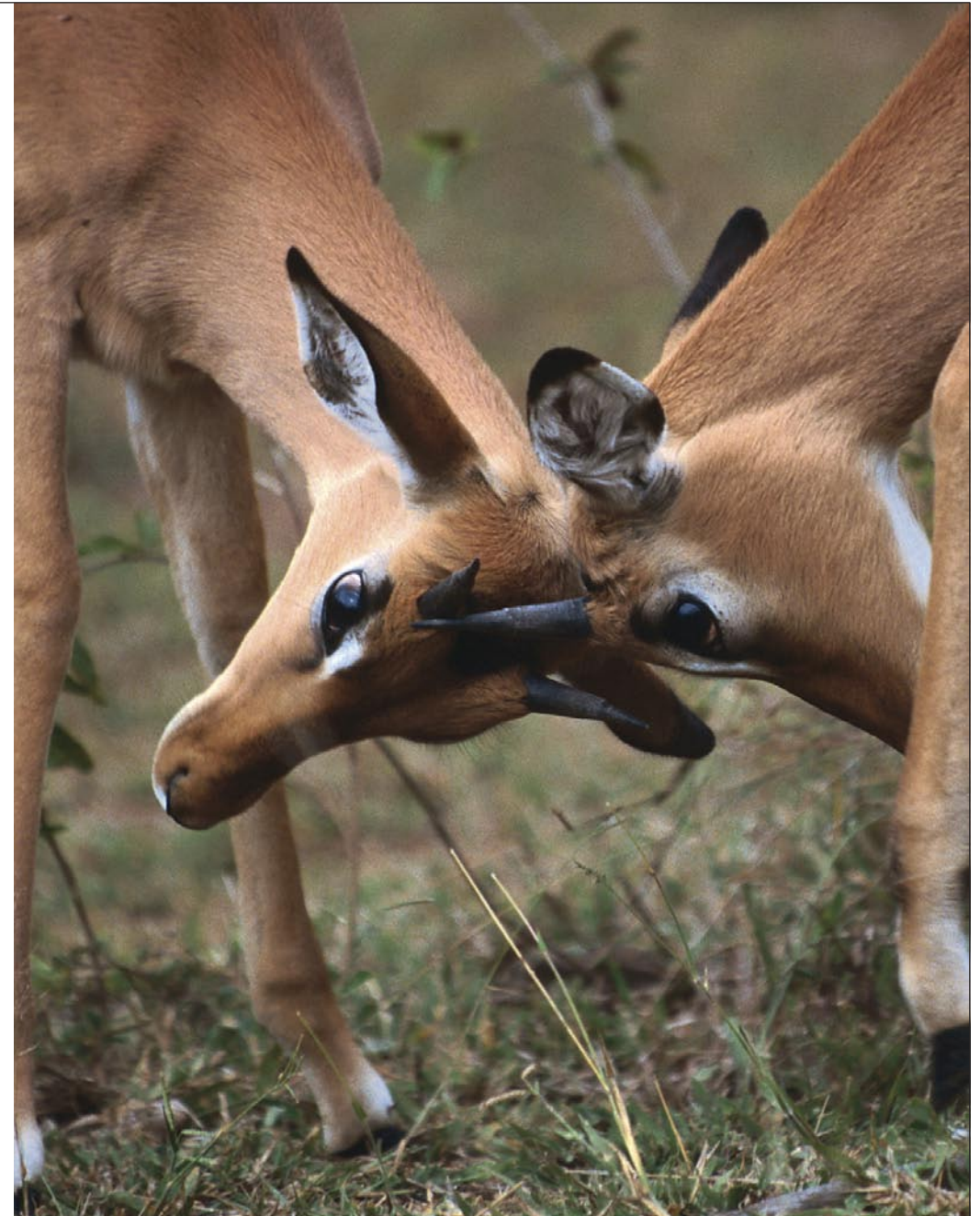
jumbo’s right nostril, but the unbearably cute rock dassie is a distant cousin of the elephant, and it works every centimetre of its fuzzy round exterior to beguile adoring audiences. Thinking spotting a leopard is exciting? Wait for the thrill of spying a cheetah on the prowl, or a hyena playing hide-and-seek.

National Parks & Reserves

Kruger National Park, the most famous of South Africa’s national parks, fills an area the size of Wales or Israel, with over 1200 species of plants and animals – that’s enough to hook you for weeks. Impressed?

Well then, take a moment to consider the size of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, which will ultimately link Kruger with conservation areas in Zimbabwe and Mozambique to encompass some 100,000 sq km – that’s enough to hook you until middle age.

Kruger is a conservation marvel; its varied landscapes shift dramatically and alter the spread of wildlife in their wake. Rhinos and buffalos favour the richly wooded southwest, and the abundance of grazers in the grasslands and mountainous spine of the east attract lions and other predators. The dry mopani forests in the north are the stomping grounds for the mighty African elephant.





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Excellent infrastructure enables you to see Kruger however you like. The **Lebombo Motorised Eco Trail** is a ready-made 4WD, DIY route for intrepid explorers. If that sounds like too much effort, take one of the myriad small group, high-quality tours with outfits such as **Wildlife Safaris** (011-791 4238; www.wildlifesaf.co.za) and **Bundu Safari Company** (011-675 0767; www.bundusafaris.co.za). Once you’re inside leave the hard work to the experts and take a dawn or **night wildlife drive** with a park ranger at the helm.

But the best way to see the park is to play David Attenborough on a dawn

or dusk **bush walk** with an armed ranger as your tour guide. If you fancy it enough embark on a ranger-guided **wilderness walking trail**.

If you want to avoid the one million or so tourists drawn to Kruger annually, escape to the beautifully desolate Kalahari Desert within the **Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park** (054-561 0021; www.sanparks.org). Straddling conservation areas in South Africa and Botswana, Kgalagadi has a surface area of over two million hectares and is one of the largest protected wilderness areas in Africa. Herds of majestic gemsbok mingle with springbok on flat, dry plains,

troupes of meerkats scamper between trees, and cheetahs survey all from steep ridges in the background. At night, lightning storms split the sky and illuminate the Kalahari’s rust-red terrain. Temperatures soar in December and January, so the best months to visit Kgalagadi are April to August.

You can explore the park with rented wheels or take a three-day tour with **Kalahari Safaris** (054-332 5653; www.kalaharisafaris.co.za). Inside the park you can make the most of the rangers’ expertise on a **night wildlife drive**.

In North-West Province you will stumble across the spectacular

Pilanesberg National Park (014-555 5356; www.parksnorthwest.co.za), home to the Big Five and also the elegant sable antelope.

In the far north is **Madikwe Game Reserve** (083-629 8282; www.parksnorthwest.co.za), one of South Africa’s best-kept secrets, where you can rough it in the rudimentary **Mosethla Bush Camp** (011-444 9345; www.thebushcamp.com), or style it up in one of the luxury lodges – see www.madikwe.com.

Both Pilanesberg and Madikwe are a cinch to explore in a 2WD and both are malaria free.



In the far east, **Hluhluwe-** (pronounced 'shlu-shlu-ee') **Umfolozzi Park** (035-550 8476; www.kznwildlife.com) is a picturesque mass of hills and one of your best bets to spot endangered black rhino or a loping pack of wild dogs, the most endangered canine in Africa. It's also the place to be bold; tackle your fears and the terrain on one of the acclaimed **wilderness trails**. Carrying your own gear and bathing from bucket showers at night, these treks vary from three to five days and will plant you firmly in the wilderness.

Skirting the southern coastline, **Addo Elephant National Park** (042-223 0556; www.sanparks.org) shelters the remnants of the mighty herds that once owned the area. Addo has increased the jumbo population from a decimated 11 to 300, and witnessing these graceful creatures slowly reclaim their territory is unnervingly moving. Watching the wildlife on terra firma, it's easy to forget the abundance in the sky. Any trip to South Africa will turn even the harshest sceptic into an amateur ornithologist, and the **Greater St Lucia Wetland Park** is the

“Safari *noun* (pl. safaris) an expedition to observe animals in their natural habitat.”



WILDLIFE SAFARIS

The South African safari puts all manner of spins on the wildlife-viewing experience. In Pilanesberg you can track rhinos on foot or take an elephant-back safari with **Gametrackers Outdoor Adventures** (014-552 5020; www.gametrac.co.za). Or try a canoe safari with **Muzi Pan Adventures** (073-161 8189) in Greater St Lucia Wetlands Park. Suffering car-cabin fever? Take a two-hour horse trail in Addo Elephant Park (the trail navigates lion-free terrain) or tackle one of Kruger's mountain-bike trails. In Hermanus, **Walker Bay Adventures** (028-314 0925) puts you in arms reach of migrating southern-right whales on a sea-kayaking tour.

place to indulge your new-found passion. So great is the biodiversity of this park, it has been declared a Unesco World Heritage site. Occupying a stretch of the east coast, it encompasses offshore reefs, beaches, lakes, coastal forests, wetlands and woodlands – to name a few ecosystems. An estimated 530 bird species inhabit the park alongside sizeable communities of crocodiles, hippos and turtles. There are tours and activities galore, including birding tours with **Zululand Birding Route** (033-753 5644), turtle tours with **EuroZulu Safaris** (035-590 2173) and whale-watching tours with **Advantage Tours** (035-590 1259).

Speaking of which, one of South Africa's most spectacular wildlife experiences comes courtesy of a group of tourists on their annual pilgrimage. A hop and a skip east of Cape Town, **Hermanus** is considered the premier land-based whale-watching destination in the world. Between June and November, southern-right whales interrupt their migration south and hang out in Walker Bay to calve. Viewing their acrobatics is as easy as parking yourself on the shoreline, but you can plant yourself in their territory with **Southern Right Charters** (082-353 0550) or **Hermanus Whale Cruises** (028-313 2722). Fret not if this tiny coastal town doesn't appear on your itinerary, the whales can also be spotted all along the glorious Garden Route of the south coast and beyond to Plettenberg Bay.



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PRIVATE SAFARIS

The only thing more romantic than an African safari adventure is an African safari adventure while treating yourself to the finest champagne. Catering to every whim of the discerning tourist, South Africa's profusion of private game reserves wraps the best of the country's wilderness up in an utterly indulgent package.

The greatest concentration fringe Kruger National Park. World-renowned retreats pepper the opulent and private **Sabie Sand Game Reserve** (<http://sabi.krugerpark.co.za>). If you really want to blow your mind and the budget, head to two of the finest lodges in all of Africa: **Singita Private Game Reserve** (021-683 3424; www.singita.co.za) and **Londolozi Private Game Reserve** (011-809 4300; www.londolozi.com). Both offer breathtaking accommodation and all-inclusive packages, with sublime cuisine, drinks, game drives and walks. The best fun you can have while feeling like a million bucks.